



Siege Mentality

How the White House is exploiting terrorism to promote a reactionary domestic agenda

by Michael Parenti

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When almost-elected President George W. Bush announced his "war on terrorism" in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, he also launched a campaign to advance the agenda of the reactionary Right at home and abroad. This includes rolling back an already mangled federal human services sector, reverting to deficit spending for the benefit of a wealthy creditor class, increasing the repression of dissent, and further expanding the budgets and global reach of the US military and other components of the national security state.

Indeed, a week after the terrorist attacks, the Wall Street Journal ran an editorial calling on Bush to quickly take advantage of the "unique political climate" to "assert his leadership not just on security and foreign policy but across the board." The editorial summoned the president to push quickly for more tax-rate cuts, expanded oil drilling in Alaska, fast-track authority for trade negotiations, and raids on the Social Security surplus.

Bush himself noted that the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon offered "an opportunity" to "strengthen America." As numerous conservatives spoke eagerly of putting the country on a permanent war footing, the president proudly declared "the first war of the 21st century" against an unspecified enemy to extend over an indefinite time frame. Swept along in the jingoist tide, that gaggle of political wimps known as the US Congress granted Bush the power to initiate military action against any nation, organization, or individual of his choosing, without having to proffer evidence to justify the attack.

Such an unlimited grant of arbitrary power-in violation of international law, the UN charter, and the US Constitution-transformed the almost-elected president into an absolute monarch who can exercise life-and-death power over any quarter of the world. Needless to say, numerous other nations greeted the president's elevation to King of the Planet with something less than enthusiasm.

And King of the Planet is how he is acting, bombing already badly battered and impoverished Afghanistan-supposedly to "get" Osama bin Laden. Unmentioned is that US leaders actively fostered and financed the rise of the Taliban, and previously refused to go after bin Laden. Meanwhile, the White House announced that other countries may be bombed at will and the war will continue for many years. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz urged that US armed forces be allowed to engage in domestic law enforcement, a responsibility denied the military since 1878.

Under pressure to present a united front against terrorism, Democratic legislators roll over on the issue of military spending. Opposition to the so-called missile defense shield is evaporating, as is willingness to preserve the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. The lawmakers may come up with most of the \$8.3 billion that the White House wants to develop the missile defense shield and move forward with militarizing outer space. Congress is marching in lockstep behind Bush's proposal to jack up the military budget. Additional funds have been promised to the National Security Agency (NSA), CIA, FBI, and other skullduggery units of the national security state. Having been shown that the already gargantuan defense budget wasn't enough to stop a group of suicidal hijackers armed with box cutters, Bush and Congress thought it best to pour still more money into the pockets of the military-industrial cartel.

Many of the measures to "fight terrorism" have little to do with actual security. They are public relations ploys designed to: (a) heighten the nation's siege psychology, and (b) demonstrate that the government has things under control. So, aircraft carriers are deployed off the coast of New York to "guard the city," national guardsmen armed with automatic weapons "patrol the airports," and sidewalk baggage check-ins and electronic tickets are prohibited, supposedly to create "greater security." Since increased security leads to greater inconvenience, it has been decided that greater inconvenience will somehow increase security-or at least give that appearance.

The biggest public relations ploy of all is the bombing of Afghanistan, leaving us with the reassuring image of Uncle Sam striking back at the terrorists. To stop the bombing, the Taliban offered to hand over bin Laden to a third country to stand trial, without even seeing evidence against him. But the White House rejected that offer. It seems that displaying US retaliatory power and establishing a military presence in that battered country are the primary US goals, not apprehending bin Laden.

Lost in all this is the fact that US leaders have been the greatest purveyors of terrorism throughout the world. In past decades, they or their surrogate mercenary forces have unleashed terror bombing campaigns against unarmed civilian populations-destroying houses, schools, hospitals, churches, hotels, factories, farms, bridges, and other nonmilitary targets-in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, East Timor, the Congo, Panama, Grenada, El Salvador, Guatemala, Angola, Mozambique,

Somalia, Iraq, Yugoslavia, and numerous other countries, causing death and destruction to millions of innocents. Using death squad terrorism, US leaders have also been successful in destroying reformist and democratic movements in scores of countries. Of course, hardly a word of this is uttered in the corporate media, leaving Bush and company free to parade themselves as the champions of peace and freedom.

In time, people in the US may catch on that the reactionaries in the White House have not the slightest clue about how to save us from future assaults. They seem more interested in -and are certainly more capable of-taking advantage of terrorist attacks than preventing them. They have neither the interest nor the will to make the kind of major changes in policy that would dilute the hatred so many people around the world feel toward US power. They're too busy handing the world over to the transnational corporate giants at the expense of people everywhere. And, they show no intention of making a 180-degree shift away from unilateral global domination and toward collective betterment and mutual development.

HOME FRONT OFFENSIVE

Several proposed laws are designed to expand the definition of terrorism to include all but the most innocuous forms of protest. S. 1510, for example, treats terrorism as any action that might potentially put another person at risk. That would give the feds power to seize the assets of any organization or individual deemed to be aiding or abetting "terrorist activity." And it can be applied retroactively without a statute of limitations. A telephone interview I did with Radio Tehran in mid-October, trying to explain why US foreign policy is so justifiably hated around the world, might qualify me for detention as someone who is abetting terrorism.

Other initiatives expand the authority of law enforcement officials to use wiretaps, detain immigrants, subpoena email and Internet records, and infiltrate protest organizations. More than 1000 people were rounded up and put into "preventive detention," with no charges brought against them and no legal redress. In keeping with the reactionary Right's agenda, the war against terrorism has become a cover for the war against democratic dissent and public sector services. The message is clear: The US must emulate not Athens but Sparta.

One of the White House's earliest steps to protect the country from terrorist violence was to cut from the proposed federal budget the \$1 billion slated to assist children who are victims of domestic abuse or abandonment. Certainly a nation at war has no resources to squander on battered kids or other such frills. Instead, Congress passed a \$40 billion supplemental budget, including \$20 billion for "recovery efforts," much of it to help clean up and repair New York's financial district.

Next was an "emergency package" for the airlines-\$5 billion in direct cash and \$10 billion in loan guarantees, with the promise of billions more. The airlines were beset by fiscal problems well before the September attacks. This bailout has little to do with fighting terrorism. Taken together, the loss of four planes, lawsuits by victims' families, and higher insurance rates didn't create industry-wide insolvency, and don't justify a multi-billion-dollar bailout. The real story is that once the industry was deregulated, the airlines began overcapitalizing without sufficient regard for earnings, the assumption being that profits would follow after a company squeezed its competitors to the wall by grabbing a

larger chunk of the market. So, the profligate diseconomies of "free market" corporate competition are once more picked up by the US taxpayer-this time in the name of fighting terrorism.

Meanwhile, some 80,000 airline employees were laid off in the weeks after the terrorist attacks, including ticket agents, flight attendants, pilots, mechanics, and ramp workers. They won't see a penny of the windfall reaped by the airline plutocrats and shareholders, whose patriotism doesn't extend to giving their employees a helping hand. At one point in the House debate, a frustrated Washington Democrat, Rep. Jay Inslee, shouted, "Why in this chamber do the big dogs always eat first?" Inslee was expressing concerns about the 20,000 to 30,000 Boeing workers who were being let go without any emergency allocation for their families. Sen. Peter G. Fitzgerald, an Illinois Republican, expressed a similar sentiment when casting the lone dissenting Senate vote against the bailout: "Congress should be wary of indiscriminately dishing out taxpayer dollars to prop up a failing industry without demanding something in return for taxpayers."

It remained for Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton to explain on behalf of the Bush war mongers why the handout was necessary: 'We need to look at transportation again as part of our national defense.'

The anti-terrorism hype is also serving as an excuse to silence opposition to drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The US needs oil to maintain its strength and security, we hear. Against this manipulative message, the environment doesn't stand much of a chance.

Likewise, US trade representative Robert Zoellick enlisted the terrorism hype in the campaign to surrender sovereignty to corporate dominated international trade councils. In a September Washington Post op-ed, Zoellick charged that opposition to fast track and globalization was akin to supporting the terrorists. House Republican leaders joined in, claiming that trade legislation was needed to solidify the global coalition fighting terrorism. Here was yet another overreaching, opportunistic attempt to wrap the flag around a reactionary special interest.

Actually, it is the free trade agreements that threaten our democratic sovereignty. All public programs and services that regulate or infringe in any way upon corporate-capitalism can be rolled back by industry-dominated, oligarchic trade councils. Corporations can now tell governments- federal, state, and local-what public programs and regulations are acceptable or unacceptable. The reactionaries don't explain how giving private, non-elected, corporate-dominated groups supranational, supreme power to override laws and the Constitution will help in the war against terrorism.

LOOTING THE SURPLUS

The airline bailout was only part of the spending spree. Bush endorsed a "stimulus" of \$60 to \$75 billion to lift the country out of recession by "recharging business investment." He also called for an additional \$60 billion tax cut which, like previous tax reductions, would give meager sums to ordinary folks and lavish amounts to fat cats and plutocrats. Where is all this money for defense, war, internal security, airlines, rebuilding lower Manhattan, tax cuts, and recharging the economy coming from? Much of it is from the Social Security surplus fund-which is why Bush is so eager to spend.

It is a myth that conservatives practice fiscal responsibility. Right-wing politicians who sing hymns to a balanced budget have been among the wildest deficit spenders. Between 1981 and 1992, the Reagan-Bush administrations increased the national debt from \$850 billion to \$4.5 trillion. By early 2000, the debt had climbed to over \$5.7 trillion. Two things pump up the deficit: first, successive tax cuts to rich individuals and corporations—so that the government increasingly borrows from the wealthy creditors it should be taxing; and second, titanic military budgets. In 12 years, Reagan-Bush expenditures on the military came to \$3.7 trillion. In eight years, Bill Clinton added another \$2 trillion.

The payments on the national debt amount to about \$350 billion a year, representing a colossal upward redistribution of income from working taxpayers to rich creditors. The last two Clinton budgets were the first to trim away the yearly deficit and produce a surplus. The first Bush budget also promised to produce a surplus, almost all of it from Social Security taxes. As a loyal representative of financial interests, George W., like his daddy, prefers the upward redistribution of income that comes with a large deficit. The creditor class, composed mostly of superrich individuals and financial institutions, wants the US- and every other nation-to be in debt to it.

Furthermore, the enemies of Social Security have long argued that the fund will eventually become insolvent and must therefore be privatized. (We must destroy the fund in order to save it.) But with Social Security continuing to produce record surpluses, this argument becomes increasingly implausible. By defunding Social Security, either through privatization or deficit spending or both, Bush achieves a key goal of the reactionary agenda.

HOW FAR THE FLAG?

As of October, almost-elected President Bush sported a 90 percent approval rating, as millions rallied around the flag. A majority supported his military assault upon the people of Afghanistan, in the mistaken notion that this will stop terrorism and protect US security. But before losing heart, keep a few things in mind. There are millions of people who, though deeply disturbed by the terrible deeds of Sept. 11, and apprehensive about future attacks, aren't completely swept up in the reactionary agenda.

Taking an approach that would utilize international law and diplomacy has gone unmentioned in the corporate media, yet 30 percent in the US support that option, compared to 54 percent who support military actions (with 16 percent undecided), according to a recent Gallup poll. Quite likely, a majority would support an international law approach if they ever heard it discussed and explained seriously.

In any case, millions of people in the US want neither protracted wars nor a surrender of individual rights and liberties, nor drastic cuts in public services and retirement funds. Tens of thousands have taken to the streets not to hail the chief but to oppose his war and reactionary agenda. Even among the flag-wavers, support for Bush seems to be a mile wide and an inch deep. The media-pumped jingoistic craze that grips the US today is mostly just that, a craze. In time, it grows stale and reality returns. One cannot pay the grocery bills with flags or the rent with vengeful slogans.

My thoughts go back to another President Bush, George the First, who early in 1991 had an approval rating of 93 percent, and a fawning resolution from Congress hailing his

"unerring leadership." Yet, within the year, he was defeated for reelection. Those who believe in democracy must be undeterred in their determination to educate, organize, and agitate. In any case, swimming against the tide is always preferable to being swept over the waterfall.

Michael Parenti's recent books include *History as Mystery*, *To Kill a Nation: The Attack on Yugoslavia*, and the 7th edition of *Democracy for the Few*.

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